

OPEN LETTER TO THE GOVERNMENTS OF BANANA- PRODUCING COUNTRIES IN LATIN AMERICA AND TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

February, 2020

The undersigned trade unions, environmentalists, health rights organizations, academics, and human rights, wish to transmit our deep concern and rejection to the meeting held in December 2019, by the Latin American banana sector in the facilities of the National Banana Corporation of Costa Rica (CORBANA), and led by multinational corporation Del Monte, which is present in all countries of the region. The objective was to develop a working strategy to put pressure on the European Union against a new European decision to reduce the maximum residue limits (MRLs) of pesticides in imported agricultural products, which will come into effect on January 31, 2020.

EU legislation is based on REACH Regulation, which rules on the registration, evaluation, and authorization of chemicals, as well as any restrictions that may apply to them. This regulation is applied by national authorities who evaluate substances on the basis of scientific evidence relating to human health and the environment. It allows limiting or prohibiting the production, placing on the market, or use of certain substances that pose an unacceptable risk to health or the environment. **The industrial banana production exported from Latin American countries has high levels of pesticides**, many of which are highly toxic to the environment, to workers, and to consumers. **The EU's SPS regulations have more comprehensive and rigorous standards of environmental and public health assessment** than those applied in banana producing countries; therefore **these standards must take precedence** over the health regulations applied by the WTO and the trade agreements, which consider them exclusively as barriers to free trade.

For years, we have expressed our concern about the use of agrochemicals in banana production, because not only European consumers are affected but, above all, banana workers and rural populations living near plantations. We echo the words of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food in her 2017 Special Report on the Right to Food and Pesticides, who recognizes that the most affected sector by the use of pesticides is agricultural workers, since they are exposed to pesticides through our daily practices, or accidentally (Paragraph 15).

Subsequently, in her 2018 report, the Rapporteur particularly highlights the dangerous working conditions that prevail in the agricultural sector, which threaten the lives of agricultural workers. The agricultural sector is one of the most dangerous due to regular exposure to pesticides and long working days with extreme temperatures and without adequate access to water, with additional risks for women – e.g. during pregnancies. Most agricultural workers are excluded from national protective legal frameworks, so they cannot exercise their fundamental rights of assembly or association and have no access to remedies. The report provides a comprehensive overview of the challenges that undermine the ability of agricultural workers to exercise their right to food.

On the other hand, the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Hazardous Substances and Wastes pointed out the following:

Over two million workers die every year from occupational diseases, nearly one million from toxic exposures alone... The diseases and disabilities that result from exposure to toxic substances are cruel. They include the excruciating pains of cancer, the suffocating torture of respiratory diseases, and the psychological torment of parents watching the impacts of their own exposures materialize in their children. Furthering the suffering of victims is the audacious behavior of certain States and businesses that go to unimaginable lengths to deny impacts on health, set permissible exposure levels that will undoubtedly cause adverse health impacts, or go as far as blaming the victims themselves for the misuse of toxic substances¹.

A comparative epidemiological investigation conducted in Ecuador to determine the working conditions, well-being, and health of a) banana workers, b) workers in conventional agriculture who use pesticide and c) small banana producers in fair or organic agriculture; revealed **the serious health problems present in banana workers exposed to pesticides**.

This reality is experienced in other banana producing countries. In Costa Rica, studies carried out by the University of Costa Rica show that the air outside the educational centers near banana farms is polluted with at least 14 different active ingredients, with chlorpyrifos being the most widely detected pesticide. In June 2017, several U.S. civil society organizations filed an administrative appeal with the EPA, urging the Federal Government to ban the use of this pesticide. In its turn, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) confirmed its genotoxic and neurological effects on children's development.

In Colombia, an investigation by the University of Caldas made a comparative analysis of cholinesterase levels in blood samples from technicians working on a banana plantation, with men and women fruit packers exposed to chlorpyrifos and other pesticides, and found that the former did not exhibit alterations in cholinesterase, while the baggers showed alterations in some values during the last two years. It is considered that the difference is due to the permanent contact with chlorpyrifos by constantly handling the field bags and, in turn, the period of time they have been doing this work, which is why baggers are the most vulnerable group over time. The study also showed that the only decision taken with workers with cholinesterase disorders was to relocate them.²

In consideration of the above background, we reject the fact that the large banana producers, traders, and exporters, in order to maximize their profits, want to maintain production patterns that threaten the health of the rural populations living in the banana plantations' areas of influence, of the agricultural workers, of the consumers in general, and of nature.

Along with this, we reject the presence of the Ministry of Foreign Trade of Costa Rica

¹ A /HRC/39/48. The situation of workers implicated and affected by occupational exposure to toxic and otherwise hazardous substances worldwide.

² Aguirre et al. Contaminación de operarios con clorpirifos, por práctica de “embolsado” de banano (Musa sp.) en Urabá, Antioquia. Revista Luna Azul No. 38, January – June 2014.

in these types of meetings, who instead of looking out for the welfare of their constituents, human rights, including the right to food, choose to look out for corporate interests.

Signed

Sindicato bananero ASTAC-Ecuador
Acción Ecológica Ecuador
Sindicato bananero SINTRACOL- Colombia
Sindicato bananero SINTRAGRANCOL– Colombia
Grupo Semillas – Colombia
Red de Coordinación en Biodiversidad - Costa Rica
Federación Ecologista de Costa Rica
Colectivo Voces Ecológicas COVEC – Panamá
ANAFEA - Honduras
Red por una América Latina Libre de Transgénicos.
FOS – Bélgica
Unión de Científicos Comprometidos con la Sociedad y la Naturaleza en América Latina (UCCSNAL)
Society of Doctors for the Environment - Austria
Susana Ramirez Hita - Universidad Rovira i Virgili (España)
Gabriel Jaime Otálvaro Castro - Profesor Facultad Nacional de Salud Pública - Medellín, Colombia
Mathieu Feagan – Lecturer- School for the Future of Innovation in Society- Arizona State University
Marta Berbés-Blázquez, PhD. - School for the Future of Innovation in Society - Arizona State University
Colectivo Colibrí (Scholars from Ecuador, Colombia, Bolivia, México and Canada)
Organización Política Carmen Lyra – Costa Rica
Oficina de Derechos de la Naturaleza
SERJUS – Guatemala
Centro de Documentación e Información Bolivia - CEDIB – Bolivia
Campaña Guatemala Sin Hambre
Joerg Nowak, School of Business, University College Dublin, Ireland
Oxfam Alemania
FIAN Internacional
FIAN Honduras
FIAN Colombia
FIAN Brasil
Alianza por la Biodiversidad en América Latina
Instituto de Estudios Agrarios y Rurales (IDEAR) de la Coordinación de ONG y Cooperativas (CONGCOOP), Guatemala.
Alianza por el Agua, Guatemala
Instituto de Estudios Agrarios y Rurales (IDEAR) de la Coordinación de ONG y Cooperativas (CONGCOOP), Guatemala
Alianza por el Agua, Guatemala
Plataforma Agraria, Guatemala
Red Nacional por la Defensa de la Soberanía Alimentaria en Guatemala (REDSAG)

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Red Europa de Comités Oscar Romero
Grupo Belga 'Solidair Met Guatemala'
FORUM SYD de Suecia miembro de EULAT
Coordinadora Nacional Campesina Eloy Alfaro – Ecuador
Asociația Mai bine, Elvys Sandu Prisecaru, President – Rumania
Grupo Guillermo Fergusson - Colectivo de Derecho a la salud - Colombia